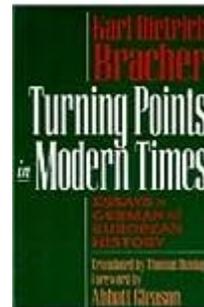


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Karl Dietrich Bracher.** *Turning Points in Modern Times: Essays on German and European History.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995. xiv + 338 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-91353-0; \$34.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-91354-7.



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*Turning Points in Modern Times* is a collection of nineteen addresses and essays written by Karl Dietrich Bracher between 1983 and 1992. Bracher, a longtime Professor of Political Science at the University of Bonn, recounts how his first real experience with liberal democracy came after 1943 when he was captured during the North African campaign and interned in a POW camp in Kansas. Bracher studied ancient history at the camp and continued after the war at the University of Tuebingen. Inevitably he was drawn from the fall of the Roman Republic to the more recent fall of the Weimar Republic; this latter problem has preoccupied most of his professional life. The book is not intended as a scholarly volume so much as a presentation of more informal essays and think-pieces. It creates the effect of sitting in conversation by a fireplace with a wise old friend, roving time and space from the streets of ancient Athens to the gulags of the modern Soviet Union. The rather random arrangement allows for no development of argument but the recurring themes throughout are the natures of democracy, socialism, and totalitarianism.

In the spirit of pleasant but vigorous conversation, let me take issue with some of Bracher's theories and interpretations. The editors at Harvard should have arranged the volume so that the essay "Totalitarianism as Concept and Reality" could have appeared first (instead of tenth)

and "The Ideas and Failure of Socialism" second (rather than fifth). These two essays lay out the strengths and weaknesses of Bracher's theories. Bracher himself seems unsure at times what constitutes a fully totalitarian system. Sometimes he uses a broad brush to cover all fascist and communist dictatorships; other times, he seems to pull back. Clearly there were differences in the Soviet Union under Stalin on the one hand and Khrushchev and Brezhnev on the other. It is very difficult to draw sharp lines when discussing centralized political power. Many Americans would regard German gun laws, personal registration with authorities, radio and television licensing, and closing hours as "totalitarian" intrusions upon liberty. Bracher includes China as a totalitarian society, yet he was allowed to deliver an address at Southeastern University in Nanking.

These are old debates, but at times Bracher ventures onto shakier ground. He exalts a society of laws as being a vital democratic distinction, but the judicial systems of western democracies vary wildly and are often criticized for not providing justice. In 1987, he believed that "the late totalitarianism in the Communist system is still powerful enough...to quash any opposition from dissidents should it want to." I wonder how the Ceaucescus would have felt about this statement. Indeed many of the essays are suffused with the democratic pessimism of the

late 1970s often associated with the ideas of Jean-Francois Revel, where democracies were allegedly falling prey to a “totalitarian temptation.” Bracher has too much faith in totalitarianism: “in the 1950s...performance and living standards started to lag behind those in the West.” Does this mean that Stalin’s USSR in the 1930s had the same living standard as Roosevelt’s USA? One might talk instead of a “democratic temptation”: I cannot think of any liberal democracies voluntarily turning themselves over to dictatorship in the last twenty-five years, but many dictatorships have opened up voting procedures or have even surrendered power (Poland, Hungary, Nicaragua, etc.).

This issue leads back to the study of the fall of the Weimar Republic, where Bracher justly gained his fame. He sums up much of his current thinking in this volume. Bracher believes that Weimar’s main problems were the unpopularity of democracy and the role of Hindenburg as president. I can make a strong case that democracy was very popular: participation rates in voting rose steadily in the 1928-1933 period. People desperately sought relief from the Depression by voting for the parties which had social programs: the Communists, Socialists, and Nazis. As William S. Allen and Thomas Childers have written, many outside the urban working class would not vote for the left, and with the failure and collapse of the traditional middle class parties, they were left with only the Nazis. Friedrich Ebert was also no stranger to the use of Article 48; he signed the decrees dissolving the state governments of Saxony and Thuringia, which served as precedents for von Papen’s dissolution of the government of Prussia.

A recurring weakness in the work is the disregard of economics. One need hardly be a Marxist to believe that the condition of the economy played a major role in the collapse of the Weimar Republic and in the gradual decay and collapse of totalitarianism in Russia. In his essay on socialism, Bracher identifies the portions of Marxist socialism derived from Hegel without noting that many of Marx’s most flawed theories came from liberal economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo. However, Bracher’s writings are useful antidotes to neo-Hegelian writings about the “end of history.”

Bracher has a broad knowledge of ancient and modern history, but is notably weaker on medieval and early modern history. He lumps Montesquieu and Tocqueville together as believers in representative liberal democracy. However, middle-class liberals picked up Montesquieu’s ideas of federalism and a separation of powers only after the American Revolution. Montesquieu originally intended the aristocracy to use these ideas against monarchical power.

Six of the essays touch upon the revolutions of 1989. Bracher fears that the same national problems which engulfed Europe in war in 1939 may resurface. He thus urges the growth of federal institutions for all of Europe just as Western Europe formed cooperative groups and the Federal Republic combined a federal political system and a social market economy. In summary, *Turning Points in Modern Times* is a thought-provoking book. Even if one does not agree with all of Bracher’s points, we rise from the fireplace seats, still friends.

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